DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 308 CE 063 848

TITLE	Women in Labor Organizations. Facts on Working Women No. 89-2.
INSTITUTION	Women's Bureau (DOL), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Aug 89
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adults; Blacks; *Employed Women; *Employment Patterns; Futures (of Society); Males; Occupations; Participation; *Salary Wage Differentials; *Unions; Wages; Whites

ABSTRACT

Data on women in labor unions in 1988 reveal the following facts: (1) women are becoming an increasingly important part of membership in organized labor, as the total number of workers in unions declines; (2) in 1988, nearly 6 million of the 47.5 million employed women in the United States, or about 13 percent, were members of unions; (3) since 1983, the proportion of employed women who belong to unions has declined; (4) membership growth was the greatest among black women; (5) labor organizations seem to be appealing mainly to government workers who are in the skilled professions and technical, clerical, and protective service jobs at all levels where women are heavily employed; (6) in 1988, median weekly earnings for women union members were more than $100 higher than for nonunion women workers, but union women continued to earn over $100 less weekly than union men; and (7) women's participation in labor unions has been most visible in the role of organizers. (KC)

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Facts on Working Women

U.S. Department of Labor
Women's Bureau

ED358308

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No. 89-2
August 1989

WOMEN IN LABOR ORGANIZATIONS

Women are becoming an increasingly important part of membership in organized labor in the United States. Their importance to the labor movement has been highlighted because of the steady long-term decline in union membership as the economy has shifted significantly from emphasis on heavy industry and manufacturing to a service economy with emphasis on information technology.

In 1988, 17 million or 16.8 percent of workers were members of unions or similar professional associations. With the inclusion of 2.2 million workers represented by unions, 19.0 percent or slightly fewer than 1 of every 5 workers was covered by collective bargaining agreements. Union membership has been on the decline since the late 1970's. In line with their increased labor force activity, however, and the burgeoning of services and information technology, women's union membership growth has forestalled an even sharper drop in overall membership.

In 1988 nearly 6 million of the 47.5 million employed women in the U.S., or about 13 percent, were members of unions or similar professional associations. A 140,000 increase in labor union women since 1987 represented a 2.4 percent growth, more than twice the rate of the preceding 12 months when their numbers rose by 40,000. Women's membership growth was solely responsible for the relatively steady number of unionized workers since 1987. Men's membership in 1988 was marginally lower. Today women represent more than 1 of every 3 labor union members (35.2 percent) and their share has been growing for the past 5 years.

In spite of the importance of increased numbers of union women to the continued viability of unions, the rapid entry of women into the labor force generally has outpaced the growth of women's union membership. Since 1983 the proportion of employed women who are organized has declined. About 1 of every 8 women workers is in a labor organization and about 1 woman in 7 is covered by a union contract.

The growth of women in organized labor has centered largely among those ages 45 to 54 while membership has dropped among younger women.

While the numbers of new union members increased among women in every race/ethnic group, membership growth was the greatest among Black women. Of every 5 Black women 1 was in union ranks in 1988. Women were 44 percent of organized Black workers. White and Hispanic women represented about one-third each of White and Hispanic union members.

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Women's Union Membership

Year	Number (in thousands)	Union Women as Percent of: Employed Women	Total Union Membership
1988	5,982	12.6	35.2
1987	5,842	12.6	34.5
1986	5,802	12.9	34.2
1985	5,732	13.2	33.7
1984	5,829	13.8	33.6
1983	5,908	14.6	33.3

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Altogether, some 7.1 million women or 15 percent of all employed women were represented by unions. That is, they were either members of unions or worked under a formal union contract. Nearly 2 of every 5 workers covered by union contracts in 1988 (36.9 percent) were women compared with 1 of 3 workers as recently as 5 years ago. Just as among union members, the spread of contract coverage was solely attributable to increased coverage of women workers, while there was no increased coverage among men workers.

Workers covered by labor-management agreements increased most among Black workers. More than 1 in every 4 Black workers was covered. Among White and Hispanic workers, fewer than 1 of 5 was covered by union contracts.

Labor organizations seem to be appealing mainly to government workers who are in the skilled professions and technical, clerical and protective service jobs at all levels where women are heavily employed. With the exception of health care workers and a few other scattered industries, union membership growth has not yet been as rapid among women in the private sector.

Union membership and contract coverage declined among sales workers and industrial workers, including precision production, craft and repair workers, operators, fabricators, laborers and farm workers, except construction workers. In most cases, these workers are predominantly men.

Earnings

During the mid-to-late 1980's, union membership offered women higher earnings, more rapid earnings increases, and narrowed the earnings gap between the sexes. In 1988 median weekly earnings for women union members were over $100 higher than for nonunion women workers. Although the ratio of fully employed organized women's earnings was much closer to men's at 79.6 percent than among similarly employed nonunion workers, on average union women continued to earn more than $100 less weekly than union men.

Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time and Salary Workers, by Unions Status and Sex, 1983-1988

	Women		Men	
Years	Members of unions*	Non-union	Members of unions*	Non-union
1988	$403	$300	$506	$416
1987	388	288	494	406
1986	368	274	482	394
1985	350	262	465	383
1984	326	251	444	362
1983	307	238	411	353

Women's Median Weekly Earnings as a Percent of Men's, by Membership Status, 1983-1988

Years	Members of unions*	Nonunion
1988	79.6	72.1
1987	78.5	70.9
1986	76.3	69.5
1985	72.3	68.4
1984	73.4	69.3
1983	74.4	67.4

* Data refer to members of a labor union or an employee association similar to a union.

Leadership and Visibility

Women's participation in labor unions has been most visible in the role of organizers. They also have served as staff workers. The establishment of (CLUW) Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974 and of Washington Union Women (WUW) earlier, brought together women with these experiences and offered them opportunities to discuss issues of concern, develop networks and prepare for leadership roles. Women's attendance at trade union women's institutes and leadership training courses conducted in several States led to increased numbers of women moving into leadership roles and policy making positions in the 1970's and 1980's, especially within local unions. There are now many vice presidents of locals and several vice presidents of national unions as well as several national department heads.

Women have begun moving into leadership roles in the national associations in larger numbers as they have developed their own support constituencies and political strength. Today four national unions have women presidents: the Association of Flight Attendants; the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU); the Actor's Equity. These are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). A woman is also president of the National Education Association which is not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Since 1980 a woman has been a member of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO and is an international vice president. A total of three women have been named or elected to the Executive Council to date. Increasingly more women union leaders have begun to seek and win elective offices.**

Women unionists have in their agenda organizing the unorganized, leadership development and increasing participation of women unionists in their unions, increased utilization of affirmative action through their unions, health and safety, and legislative action to further women's human interests as in child care, parental leave, flexible work schedules, and pay equity.

** Much of the information in this section is from "Women as National Union Leaders," Institute for Women and Work, NYSSILR, Anne H. Nelson, Cornell University, April 14, 1989.

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1990 O—941-484